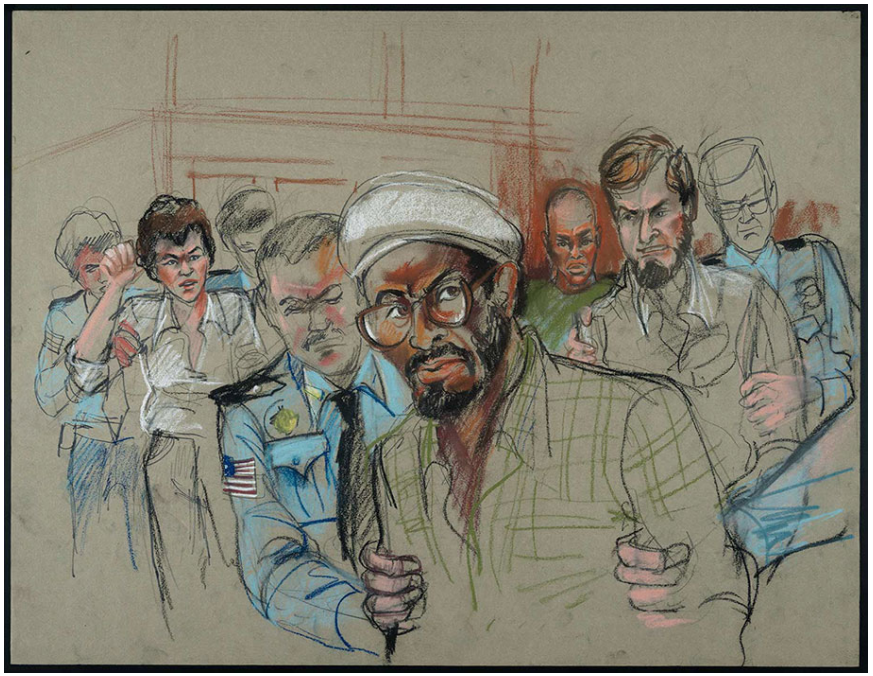
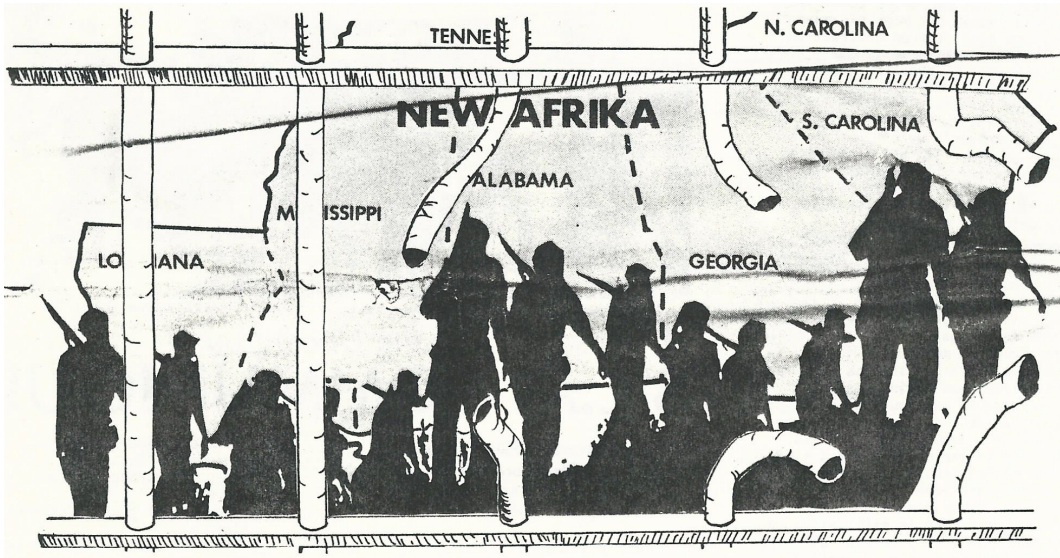


STILL BELIEVING IN LAND AND INDEPENDENCE



The work to free political prisoners is especially important work for all those who were a part of the Black Panther Party/Black Liberation Movement. It's important for those both inside and out to know that people haven't forgotten, that there is a struggle still going on. Our struggle to get the Panther political prisoners and others out is a struggle to keep the movement moving. It must remain a priority.

by

Sekou Odinga

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Front cover art from *Arm the Spirit* No. 13, Winter 1982

Back cover: Courtroom sketch of Brink's expropriation case preliminary hearing, defendants Judith Clark, Sekou Odinga, Kuwasi Balagoon, and David Gilbert shouted "Long live Palestine!" as pigs forcibly removed them, New York City, September 20, 1982

Too many of us don't know who Lumumba Shakur was, who Zayd Shakur was. It's a shame, but most of our youth don't even really know who Malcolm X was, other than that he was someone who stood against the system. But if you ask them, "What did he stand for?" very few of them can tell you. And there aren't that many who can tell you what Martin Luther King really stood for, if you ask them, "What did he do that makes you like him?" We don't study our history. We have other people teaching us who we are, people who don't have our interests at heart. If people don't know who they are, it's easy for them to destroy one another. That's why you see our kids killing each other and laughing about it, not even caring. They don't recognize that they're beefing with themselves; they're fighting themselves; they're killing themselves. They don't know that that's their brother—for real, that's their brother. With study and organization, with widespread cultural revolution, it becomes clear that we can't get freedom without land and independence.

STILL BELIEVING IN LAND AND INDEPENDENCE

Sekou Odinga

In the name of Allah, the Beneficent, the Merciful.
I bear witness that there is no God but Allah, Creator and Sustainer of all the Universe. He alone deserves the worship and He alone deserves the praise. And I bear witness that Muhammad ibn Abdullah is His last Prophet and slave servant.

From the early summer of 1970 and onward I was in Algeria. I was there to help open the Black Panther Party's International Section. Our responsibility was the accumulation and dissemination of information. Eldridge and Kathleen Cleaver were there, Donald Cox (Field Marshall D.C.), Larry Mack, and a few others were there, but it was a fairly small group at that time. We wanted to gather information from various political formations, front line anti-colonial struggles, such as the MPLA of Angola, ANC of South Africa, ZANU and ZAPU of Zimbabwe, and the Palestinians (PLO). There were also representatives of progressive and revolutionary governments—the Chinese government was there, and the North Vietnamese were as well—almost all progressive or left-leaning governments were there.

Algeria had opened its doors and invited all progressive movements to come, gather, and work together. Initially, the Algerian government was very active in supporting the work. Not only did it give us a building where we

could open our office, it also gave us a little stipend to help us maintain that office. We were able to have conversations, to build international relations just by being there with each other in the capital.

We were reading all the information coming from the liberation movements and progressive governments and sharing the Black Panther news with other oppressed peoples. Most reported on the ways in which their struggles were going, how their struggles were proceeding, what their goals were. Most of them today, other than the Palestinians, are independent states. The Palestinians and New Afrikans in America are about the only ones who have not yet achieved self-determination: land and independence. We initially were able to do a lot of things; we traveled a lot—we went to the Congo, North Korea, China, Egypt, and other places.

I went to Kuwait for the Second International Symposium on Palestine, held in February 1971. We worked with Palestinian student groups there. I went to Egypt and Lebanon a number of times, and the International Section was able to send representatives to a number of other places. I remember meeting a Palestinian comrade named Abu, who was based in Egypt. He provided all kinds of help to us. He was a relatively young man, mid-thirties, who had been on the front lines and was wanted in Israel. He was a real good comrade who invited us to meet his people in Egypt and in a number of other countries. He was a revolutionary who believed in international solidarity. He believed that our struggle was part and parcel of his struggle. Abu approached us with open arms and wanted to help in any way that he could. We also met with PLO leader Yasser Arafat.

After a couple of years in Algeria the U.S. government, represented by Robert McNamara (then president of the World Bank and former U.S. secretary of defense), made a political and financial deal with the Algerian government to help them develop their natural gas. When Algeria actually signed the contract, one of the conditions that the U.S. asked for was that we be turned over to them. A number of us had cases pending against us—Larry Mack, Cetewayo (Michael Tabor), and myself of the Panther 21, Donald Cox, or D.C. as we called him, and Pete O'Neal from Kansas City.

Algeria refused to give us up, but McNamara came up with a compromise: at the very least, he wanted the Algerians to shut us up. He told them: "You can't let them keep putting out all this negative information about the U.S. government." The Algerians did agree to that, and at one point they actually put us under house arrest, demanding that we give up any arms that we might have. They interrupted our telex service, which was the main way we were able to easily communicate with the outside world.

part of the same movement. Our movement, although crippled, is still alive. People are still struggling; Black/New Afrikan people are still oppressed. We are still at the bottom of the system: All the negatives that were there in the 1960s still are here today. It's important that those of us who are part of the movement, who are no longer dealing with armed struggle, continue to deal with our struggle on whatever level we can. We can deal with, and I choose to deal with, the work to free political prisoners.

The work to free political prisoners is especially important work for all those who were a part of the Black Panther Party/Black Liberation Movement. It's important for those both inside and out to know that people haven't forgotten, that there is a struggle still going on. Our struggle to get the Panther political prisoners and others out is a struggle to keep the movement moving. It must remain a priority.

Young people need to know that they can't do it alone. They need to be organized, and they need to be clear about what their goals are. They need to be goal-oriented, and to have long-term and short-term goals. Short-terms goals, of course, need to be conducive to accomplishing the long-term goals. Black and New Afrikan people in particular need to know who we are—where we came from, where we're at, but also where we want to go. We need to be clear about what freedom means. Does freedom mean a $60,000–100,000 a year job? Does freedom mean being able to go to any school we want? Does freedom mean land and independence? I think a cultural revolution is needed to help us identify what freedom means. When we talk about Black people, African people, and New Afrikan people, we need to know who we are. If I asked any of my white allies what's their nationality, they probably would tell me exactly what it is. But if you ask ten Black people what their nationality is, you probably will get four or five answers—if not more. I think we need a cultural revolution; a cultural revolution should be able to make that clear—how we're going to get to where we need to be.

I talk about a cultural revolution in part because it's widely "acceptable." It's something that I can talk to the preacher about, I can talk to the Rabbi about, I can talk to the Imam about, I can talk to the social worker about, I can talk to the policeman about—because anybody who has any interest in the people, in Black/New Afrikan people, won't have a problem with a cultural revolution. Plus, culture is what binds a people together—what makes a people a people: same language, same history, same land, etc. So it is in fact not just acceptable, but I think a necessary analysis of what I'm talking about.

What do I say to young people today? Organize, organize, organize! I say that again and again. And to study: study your history—ancient and modern.

us had a political consciousness around the need for the potential for retaliation—that there should be some consequences to the actions of the police and the government. Some folks just wanted to fight back. Police say that their own violence is justifiable homicide. We said, "It's not justifiable to kill unarmed schoolchildren like Clifford Glover, or grandmothers a bit late on their rent like Eleanor Bumpurs." We said, "It's not justifiable to kill unarmed civilians." We said, "There would be consequences for that kind of state murder."

As for me, I believed in land and independence. And I still believe that freedom is based on land and independence!

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The case of the Panther 21 has always been important as a historical factor in New Afrikan people's movement for land and independence. Our case was one of the first major political cases that had a large number of Black radical political prisoners. Twenty-one were indicted, thirteen actually locked up for a long period of time. It was important to understand why the state did it and some of the effects of locking us up. It was a prelude to the split in the BPP itself; a lot of contradictions were brought forward from people in the NY 21 when they talked about where money was going. As I said before, I think the government knew that they didn't have much of a case, but that we'd have to fight the case. To do that, they knew we'd have to take people off the streets who were very effective organizing on the streets.

The 21 was a collection of revolutionary Black men and women, and most of these radicals continued to work in radical politics, radical struggle. Some of us went underground and took up arms to defend the community. In that sense, there was a continuum; it never stopped. Maybe it got quiet; some people had been forgotten. Sometimes we didn't want things to be in the limelight; the less people thought about them, the more the people underground were able to do.

One thing we know is that Assata Shakur was liberated. What some might not know is that I was convicted of aiding in Assata's liberation. I was accused of going into the Clinton Correctional Facility in New Jersey and bringing her out. That probably wouldn't have been possible if my picture had been flashed around in the media, with my name ringing out. But the continuity of struggle never stopped—even though most people didn't know what was going on.

The work I'm trying to do today is to legally help free those still in prison for their political beliefs and activities—political prisoners and prisoners of war. It's not just personal—those inside are part of our movement. We are all

Some of us decided that it was time to leave. We no longer felt completely safe in Algeria. Some of us decided to go to France, others to Tanzania, still others to Zambia. And some of us continued the work in Algeria. Larry Mack and I came back to the U.S. We decided to come back because Amerikkka is where our struggle was, where we felt we could be most effective. This was after the acquittal of the Panther 21 on all charges (May 13, 1971), but we thought that—because the FBI's and police attacks, and because of renegade Panthers—our lives were still in danger.

Although I don't really remember how I felt upon hearing of the acquittal of the NY 21, I'm sure I was very happy. Because it was a clear victory; I definitely felt that. It was a clear-cut political victory. The government had pulled out a lot of stops to try to get a conviction and had failed. I always felt that if the jury was not totally right-wing dogs they would find us not guilty because the charges were so outrageous. They didn't make sense—that we were these hardcore revolutionaries, trying to blow up department stores and the Botanical Gardens with our own people in them!

The Panther 21 arrest was a very strategically important one for the state, and for our movement as well. The powers that be wanted to interrupt the revolutionary work that the New York Black Panther Party was doing. They identified the more radical leaders within New York and were able to disrupt our activities—the children's programs, the clothing drives, the food drives, the welfare program, the free health clinics, etc. Instead of those programs moving forward, now we would have to concentrate on getting our Black Panther Party leadership out of jail. A lot of people at that time came to prominence through the Panther 21 case. That's when people nationally first heard of Jamal Joseph and Afeni Shakur, during their public speaking. The 21 case was important because of the many ways it helped shape our movement. Even though a lot of people still don't know about it, I think this is important history.

I always felt like the charges against the Panther 21 were more of a ploy to get us off the streets and to bankrupt us, rather than to actually find us guilty. But I also always knew that there was a possibility that we could be found guilty even though the charges were outrageous. It wasn't beyond the pale, since so many other people were found guilty of outrageous acts that we thought people should have known were bullshit. The U.S. government did achieve the goal of getting a lot of the leadership of the NY Black Panther Party off of the street. It did even more than they thought it would do—it probably precipitated the split within the Party.

One of the big issues which came up at that time was how the funds that were being raised specifically for the NY 21 were being used. The BPP Central

Committee (CC) in California was insisting that all funds collected by any Panthers come to them. Whatever we collected was to go straight to them, and then they'd send back whatever they deemed necessary. And they didn't seem to deem anything necessary! Huey Newton was in jail when we first started to complain about this. Huey initially was sympathetic to the plight of the NY 21 while he was in jail. BPP Chief of Staff David Hilliard was the main one who insisted that the money go through him.

Once Huey got out, however, he too adopted David's position, and they weren't sending any money back to New York. We had people in jail with large bail, and much of the money had been specifically raised for their bail. Being in Algeria at the time, Cetewayo, Larry and I insisted that our section, the International Section, take up our plight. We were able to get the International Section to demand that the money raised for the bail—at least a major part of it—go toward what it was raised for. That demand precipitated a contradiction between the International Section "led by" Eldridge Cleaver and the BPP Central Committee. I put the words "led by" in quotes because it wasn't actually only led by Eldridge; we operated more under democratic conditions, so we made collective decisions.

We consistently voted to support the NY 21 position at a time when divisions were beginning. The first big difference arose when the NY 21 put out a statement, a January 1971 "Open Letter to the Weather Underground"—the "mother country" radical organization that had grown out of Students for a Democratic Society. The statement was critical of the racism we saw in all white movements, and—while wishing them revolutionary victory—it cautioned them to remember that "the degree of racial co-existence greatly depends on your successes." The West Coast didn't like that we were critically supportive of Weather, and especially didn't like that we asserted our criticism without asking them first. Our position was that we didn't need to ask them; we reserved the right to have our own opinions.

There were a lot of issues between East and West that were coming to a head. There were issues about where Huey was living and how much rent he was paying while so many rank-and-file Panthers were living collectively in virtual poverty. There were concerns about how Huey was treating people and many other things that bothered us. But the issues around the NY 21 brought it all to a splitting point. The period was very tumultuous, but it wasn't just about the times. We felt that the more power and money Huey got the softer he got. We read this as Huey becoming more reformist, developing bourgeois tendencies which weren't compatible with what we had been taught and were teaching. He was becoming very dictatorial, demanding that he be called the

"Supreme Commander." At this time, it seemed like Huey was mainly thinking about and talking about himself: "I did this, and I did that: I, I, I."

But the straw that broke the camel's back was the money issue regarding the NY 21. The CC began by expelling one of us, then another. Finally, they said that everyone from the NY 21 was expelled. We in Algeria disagreed with that and put out a written statement supporting fully the NY 21 position. Huey took that as insubordination and expelled the entire International Section. We were supposed to have a public coming together over the radio—between Huey and those of us in Algeria. Actually, we blindsided him. He thought we were coming on to reconcile, but we came on with our criticisms and he was mad as hell. Ultimately, we just brought the split—which was clearly already there—out into the open.

In 1973, the BPP in New York City was still officially in existence, but was dying. The Harlem office closed. After the death of Sam Napier, a leader from the West Coast who was working in NY, everything just became an armed struggle among ourselves. Some of us at this time began shifting into the Black Liberation Army (BLA). It was a time of war. Those who were inclined to rumble went (or were already) underground. I thought that building a clandestine, underground capacity was necessary.

Although I was still underground, I would have surfaced if I believed with any confidence that I could have done so without being captured and imprisoned. I had a family, and though I did see them occasionally I couldn't see them on any regular basis. I wanted to. The illegal Counter Intelligence Program (COINTELPRO) of the U.S. government seemed so effective that work above ground was no longer strategic. We couldn't work under the banner of the Black Panther Party, which was at war with itself. A clandestine movement could bring about political consequences when the people were attacked by the state. Much like it is today, the state apparatus (federal, state, and local police and sheriff departments, etc.) were constantly brutalizing and murdering people of color, especially radical Black people. Leading members of the BPP were primary targets, like Chicago's Fred Hampton, Los Angeles's John Huggins and Bunchy Carter, and many others around the country. The police and all the press gloated over the murder of Panthers. We were under siege.

The BLA units that I worked with were semiautonomous or completely autonomous. Some of them had members from out of the Party; actually, most of those I worked with had at least one or two members who had been in the Party. But all of them also had members who hadn't been in the Party. All of us believed in the need to build a clandestine response; in fact, the BLA was just one response. Some units, especially from the South, weren't BLA at all. All of